C. The League of Peace and Freedom, 1867–1868

Published by

Miller, Martin A.
The Russian Revolutionary Emigres, 1825-1870.

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The League of Peace and Freedom, 1867–1868

In 1867 and 1868, two international congresses were held in Switzerland under the sponsorship of the League of Peace and Freedom. The first meeting took place in Geneva and the second in Bern. It was estimated that 6,000 delegates from many countries of Europe attended these two meetings, although the first was by far the largest. The Russian emigration was represented by Bakunin, Dolgorukov, and Vyrubov; Herzen and Ogarev also were invited but chose not to attend. One of the original organizers was Jules Barni (1818–78), a French political philosopher, teacher, and activist who emigrated to Geneva after the coup d’état of Louis Napoleon.

Initially, a great deal of euphoria surrounded the League’s potential to form an organizational base for a wide spectrum of dissenters from all countries on the Continent. In the name of “free democ-

Sources: The article by Dolgorukov in a Geneva newspaper, dated 28 September 1867, is preserved in the Nicolaevskii Collection, no. 191, #20, in the Hoover Institute at Stanford University. The name of the newspaper is not included in the file. The meeting of the League actually took place 9–12 September.


On Vyrubov, see his “Revoliutionnyia vospominaniia,” Vestnik Evropy, 1913, no. 1:66–75.


Another contemporary account of the second League meeting in Bern, which includes unflattering and critical portraits of Bakunin and Utin, can be found in P. D. Boborykin, Vospominaniia (Moscow: Khudozh. lit., 1965), 2:15–22.
The League’s organizers nobly hoped to rise above parochial nationalistic interests to create a “United States of Europe,” free of war and ruled by principles of justice for all peoples. There was a call for unity between moderate and more militant socialists and émigrés under the banner of “the destruction of the Old Regimes and the dawn of the New Society,” as Vyrubov stated it. Ten thousand signatures in support of the League’s vague goals were collected across Europe; some of the leading intellectuals and political figures of the age (such as Mazzini, Hugo, and Mill) were among the signatories.

The unity that was hoped for proved to be an impossibility. Not only were there conflicts among the various nationalities, but, to treat the one case that is of concern to us, the Russians themselves could not ally with one another at the congresses. Bakunin’s impasioned and aggressive oratory in favor of international socialism, nihilism, and federalism proved to be the most divisive aspect from this perspective.

Dolgorukov, who was active in organizing the first congress in Geneva, publicly disaffiliated himself from the congress proceedings because he felt Bakunin was actually “organizing a European revolutionary committee for the propagation of his own ideas . . . which aspire for the dismemberment of his country.” According to Dolgorukov, the purpose of the congress had been “to disseminate information to foster economic rapprochement between nations, to establish cooperative societies, to seek to reduce permanent armies and replace them gradually with local militias, and to organize journals to formulate and propagate these goals.” The “communism” and “nihilism” of Bakunin’s ideas were, Dolgorukov continued, efforts at sabotaging these goals. He accused Bakunin of seeking war on governments, not rapprochement, the destruction of armies, not their transformation into bodies of local defense, and of urging the lower classes to attack private property, which would only “compel capital to emigrate and, as a result, [would] lead to even greater poverty.” Furthermore, “by having the congress declare that peace and progress are compatible exclusively with a Republican form of government,” Bakunin was not only “violating Swiss neutrality” but setting conditions that automatically condemned most existing governments.

Herzen also was critical of the League, and he too centered his discontent on Bakunin. At the same time, he was perfectly aware that the League “had no means to render its resolutions binding”
upon the delegates and had neither the authority nor the power “to diminish armaments, dissolve armies, and halt warfare.” As “a European tribune,” the League could bring some influence to bear, but only if ways were found to prevent certain theories from becoming dominant over all others. Herzen pointed an accusing finger at “Bakunin, Vyrubov, and the small group of their friends,” who style themselves as “men of the new world,” trying to be representatives of both “the golden mean and Jacobinism, who in spite of the best of intentions, support the old edifice with one hand while pulling it down with the other.”

Finally, Vyrubov himself expressed doubts about the very notions being attributed to him. He was not certain that he could support a platform proclaiming a nihilist Russia as a goal of the League, and objected to being associated with Bakunin as one of the “men of the new world,” as Herzen had called them.

The Geneva congress of the League formed a central committee, with Bakunin among its members, and held a second congress, in Bern, in 1868, but it never reconvened after that. Bakunin hoped to merge the League with the International Workingmen’s Association, in spite of his growing differences with Marx, but this too was never accomplished. With the passing of the ephemeral League of Peace and Freedom, two things became clear. First, conflicts over political ideology and nationality were too severe to be resolved within the bland and general framework of the League’s platform. Second, hopes for creating a unified émigré political program also could not be realized within the context of this moderate forum. New structures had to be created to deal with these forces.